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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the experiences of three Australian teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) who conducted teacher workshops on communicative language teaching methods in Vietnam. It provides a critical description of cultural conflicts arising from the introduction of a western teaching approach and the informants' interpretations of those conflicts. Initially it seemed that Vietnamese resistance to adopting the communicative approach lay in class sizes, grammar-base examinations, and lack of exposure to authentic language. On closer examination, it appeared that to adopt the approach, Vietnamese teachers would have to change radically some basic cultural beliefs. It is concluded that for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Vietnamese conditions, it must be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted. Based on the literature and informants' experiences, the eventual form of pedagogical practice would involve the teacher's ability to either filter the method to make it culturally appropriate or redefine the teacher-student relationship in keeping with the cultural forms embedded in the communicative approach. However, it is proposed that while this "mediating" has potential to overcome cultural barriers, it alone will not ensure the success of the approach; texts and the examination system must share the same communicative goals. Appendices include the coding system and the case study consent form. Contains 53 references. (MSE)

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THE APPROPRIATENESS OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN VIETNAM:

AN INTERVIEW STUDY IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Submitted by

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A minor thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Education

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June, 1994

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ABSTRACT

The work presented here is an interview study in intercultural communication. The informants consisted of three Australian ESL instructors who had conducted workshops on communicative language teaching methods for the Overseas Services Bureau in Vietnam. The study provides a critical description of both the cultural conflicts arising from the introduction of a Western English language teaching approach and the informants interpretations of those conflicts.

On the surface it seemed that Vietnamese resistance to adopting the communicative approach lay squarely with class sizes, grammar-based examinations, lack of exposure to authentic language etc., however, on closer investigation it became clear that the Vietnamese teachers would have to make radical changes to some of their basic cultural beliefs if they wanted to accommodate the approach being proposed.

The major findings of this work are that , for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Vietnamese conditions, it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted. As the literature suggests and examples from the informants indicate, "mediating" can serve as a useful tool in this endeavour. Thus, the eventual form of the pedagogical practice would appear to involve the teacher's ability to either filter the method to make it culturally appropriate, or to redefine the teacher-student relationship in keeping with the cultural forms embedded in the communicative approach. However, while "mediating" has the potential to overcome the cultural barriers it alone will not ensure the success of the communicative approach. The texts and, more importantly, the examination system must share the same communicative goals.

STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgment in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

June 1994

TERMINOLOGY

Approach: A set of assumptions about the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning (Savignon, 1983, p. 301).

Communicative Approach:

An approach to language teaching which "takes as its starting point the use or communicative purpose of language. This approach therefore strongly advocates careful attention to use rather than merely form/meaning. It would also favour functional-notional organisation of teaching materials. It might tend to support a "deep end" approach to presentation of new language, in which students are first to cope with the communicative task as best as possible before being given the new, necessary form (Hubbard et al, 1983, p. 326).

Competence: "Knowledge of the grammatical and other rules of a language which enable a speaker to use and understand it" (Hubbard et al, 1983, p. 326).

Form: "The actual words (written) or sound (spoken) used to express something in language, as opposed to meaning or use. Form is often synonymous with structure" (Hubbard et al, 1983, p. 327).

Grammar-Translation Method:

"The traditional deduction method of language teaching, based on classical studies of dead languages, which consisted of giving rules, paradigms and

vocabulary and getting the students to apply this new knowledge to translation...and to grammatical analysis" (Hubbard et al, 1983, p. 329).

Intercultural Communication:

"Acts of communication undertaken by individuals identified with groups exhibiting intergroup variation in shared social and cultural patterns. These shared patterns, individually expressed, are the major variables in the purpose, the manner, the mode, and the means by which the communicative process is effected" (Damen, 1987, p. 23).

Meaning: "The conventional or literal meaning of a particular form" (Hubbard et al, 1983, p. 329).

Method: "A set of techniques or procedures. These usually follow a systematic scheme. Unlike an approach, a method need not be tied to any particular theory about language or learning, but may simply be claimed as successful in practice" (Hubbard et al, 1983, p. 329).

Use: "The way in which a speaker uses a particular language form to communicate on a particular occasion. The use of a form may be described in terms of its function or communicative purpose" (Hubbard et al, 1983, p. 332).

Western: Used as an umbrella term to denote the philosophical or ideological orientation underpinning the communicative approach to EFL teaching.

ABBREVIATIONS

EFL: English as a second language taught to non-native speakers in their own environment.

ESL: A structured language acquisition program designed to teach English to non-native students in an English speaking environment.

OSB: Overseas Services Bureau.

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

This research project asks Australian ESL teachers about their perceptions of the appropriateness of a contemporary communicative language teaching approach in Vietnam. The inquiry was prompted by noting a disparity between the Vietnamese language teachers' eagerness to embrace the so-called "Western" methods and their willingness or ability to implement such methods in the classroom. The goal of the study is two-fold. First, to examine the sources of this disparity and second, to arrive at an analysis of the Australian instructors' viewpoints taking into account their cross-cultural experiences.

Background to the Problem

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent withdrawal of economic aid to satellite communist countries, the Republic of Vietnam adopted a policy of Economic Renovation, known as *doi moi*. The Russian language began to be phased out from the education system and replaced with English as the preferred second language. However, the traditional language teaching methods in Vietnam were slow in responding to the growing need for communicative competence. The textbooks still promoted the grammar-translation method and the passages were for the most part irrelevant to the students oral communication needs. In many cases, the teachers' oral skills had deteriorated, through lack of opportunity or sheer neglect, to the point where it was difficult for them to carry on a simple conversation.

In 1988 OSB placed a couple of Australian volunteers at a teacher training college in Hanoi which led to the discovery that there was an enormous need for training in English language teaching. To help address the problem, OSB began a series of workshops for teachers of foreign languages at Hanoi University during the summer vacation. Over the next four years workshops were also held in Danang and Ho Chi Minh City.

The shortcomings of what could be expected to be a very successful methodology course pointed to a cluster of cultural issues which became the focus of this inquiry. Data gathered provided a narrative account of the problems arising as a consequence of the conflicts which exist in the fundamental beliefs and values held by the Australian instructors and their Vietnamese counterparts. While the study is limited to the personal views of a small number of informants, there emerges from it themes which may have relevance for other practitioners working in similar settings.

The Communicative Approach

At the heart of this inquiry is the cultural appropriateness of a Western language teaching approach in Vietnam. The content of OSB's methodology course resembles a language teaching model proposed by Canale and Swain (1980). It is underpinned by the notion that communicative competence is both linguistic knowledge and the skill in using this knowledge. It also addresses the ways in which a learner can bridge the gap between underlying competence and actual performance, and for Canale and Swain, this ability to apply knowledge in actual situations is crucial. Thus, the instrumental aim of a communicative approach is to produce students who can communicate both orally and in writing with native speakers appropriate to their mutual needs. The desired outcomes may range from functional tasks, such as greetings, to complex academic skills. Although pronunciation, grammar and spelling play an important part in language

teaching, these forms in themselves are meaningless if removed from their social contexts.

The Distinction between ESL and EFL

Despite the fact that ESL and EFL both refer to the teaching of English to foreign students, it is important to remember that ESL takes place within an English speaking environment. As a result, the ESL student will have a far greater need to communicate. At the lower levels, the student has the opportunity to immediately test out or practice new language skills in authentic situations. At the higher levels, a great deal of language acquisition will occur outside the classroom and the ESL teacher will act more as a facilitator, providing structure, explanations and a forum for discussions. EFL, on the other hand, is always a cultural island and the EFL teacher has the somewhat onerous role of sole provider of experience in the target language. Without the reinforcement of an English speaking environment, motivation becomes more a product of the teacher's initiative and either the student's will to succeed or fear of failure.

Whereas ESL is integrative in that it is designed to help individuals function in the community, EFL is a part of the school curriculum and therefore subject to contextual factors such as, support from the principal and the local community, government policy etc. It is also dependent on the teacher's language proficiency, teaching resources and the availability of suitable materials and may or may not test communicative competence, depending on national curriculum goals. By contrast, ESL teaching is primarily designed to develop communicative competence with little or no curricular demands and pressure of examinations. Reconsidered in this light, the EFL teacher could be doing the student a disservice by focusing on oral skills when, for example, the examination is testing for translation skills.

Teaching in a Foreign Setting

As Chapter 2 will explain, teaching in a foreign setting will arouse conflicts which are often attributable to clashes of expectations and of assumptions about the acceptable behaviour of individuals from two different cultures. Such conflicts are evidence of the difficulties involved in integrating a culturally embedded teaching methodology into a vastly different culture. This study reports on these conflicts and the range of psychological responses and strategies they elicit from the informants. It is because the teacher's intercultural skills are so often taken for granted that I feel this is an area which deserves investigation.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of literature bearing on the phenomenon under investigation faces two problems. Firstly, there is very little research and sparse enough writing in the field of EFL teaching in Vietnam. Secondly, while literature in fields such as sociology, socio-linguistics, social psychology and ESL teaching all have the potential to offer perspectives on some aspects of the problem, it is only by extension or analogy. From the outset, the nature of the research problem demanded an awareness of communication problems which can occur in cross-cultural interactions, and to this extent, the literature on intercultural communication held the most promise. In addition, it seemed necessary to place the Vietnamese language teaching in its historical and social context. Thus, I begin by looking at the layers of educational influence, from Chinese Neo-Confucian to the French Third Republic, and how this has shaped contemporary educational practices; next how language and contextual cues affect our ability to communicate between cultures; and finally the types of psychological responses which may occur as a result of cultural contact at the individual level.

Cultural Imperialism

To appreciate the outlook for adopting communicative language teaching in Vietnamese high schools it is useful to look at Vietnam's historical circumstance. Several writers attest to the influence of foreign powers on present teaching and learning styles. According to Phuoc (1975), for almost one thousand years, until the tenth century, Vietnam was dominated by China. From that period on, up until the nineteenth century, Vietnam was still under the influence of Chinese Confucianism.

Before the Chinese domination there was no Vietnamese system of writing to record the spoken language. Thus, from the eleventh century until the French introduced the Latin script in the early part of the twentieth century, all government documents and school texts were recorded in Chinese ideographs. Not only was Chinese the official form of written discourse, it was also essential to acquiring positions of power. As Phuoc points out, the civil service examination system adopted in the eleventh century required the ability to memorise the forms of the Chinese writing and a scholar who passed was eligible to become a mandarin or one of the rulers. According to Marr (1981), "even one stylistic error would result in failure and exclusion from mandarin status" (p. 140).

Three major philosophical traditions have exerted their influence on the "subjective culture" of the Vietnamese: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism (Bochner, 1986, p. 98). The basic Confucian teachings provided a model for social relations (Marr, 1981). The Doctrine Of the Mean (*Trung Dung* in Vietnamese) posited a harmonious relationship between "day-to-day subjective phenomena" and a larger "predetermined reality". For the educated elite, it meant contemplating the "inner principle of things", while for the masses it meant "internalising a host of prescriptive maxims and social formalities" (p. 291).

The next major tradition to take hold in Vietnam was Buddhism which arrived during the late second century. From Buddhism the Vietnamese derived the concept of *karma*, a belief in the inevitability of suffering caused by desire. According to Buddhist doctrine, breaking the cycle of suffering can only be achieved by renouncing the objects of desire. From a Western perspective, renouncement lends itself to an unequal relationship in the basic teaching paradigm. As Bochner (1986) observes, it is seen as passivity on the part of the student, or "in a clinical setting may be misdiagnosed as depression" (p, 98).

A third religion, Taoism, also became prominent during the period of Chinese rule. Unlike Confucianism, Taoism lacked any institutional application and gradually became

relegated to the status of a superstitious cult (ibid., p. 99). Nevertheless, some Taoist principles, such as "non-action", were accommodated into Vietnamese culture due to their resonance with elements of the other two religions, for example the Confucian *mean* and the Buddhist idea of *karma*.

Overall, the amalgamation of the three religions served to maintain the status quo by holding out the promise of harmonious relations in the face of social upheaval. For the masses it fostered an attitude of resignation to one's rightful place in an agreeable whole and, according to Marr, is still firmly embedded in the collective consciousness of the Vietnamese. "Eventually arguments would be made for harmony between higher and lower echelons of organisations, between trade unions and directors of state enterprises" (p. 325).

From 1867 to 1945, Vietnam was under French rule. The French eliminated the Confucian system of education by replacing it with their own system when they promulgated the Public Instruction Codes in 1917. As Marr (1981) points out, the intelligentsia no longer felt fulfilled by contemplation. The French rule had spawned a new wave of individuals who saw thinking as a basis for purposive action and for whom "no tradition was so sacred as to be above debate" (p. 420). Whilst reactionary Confucian scholars "warned against paying too much attention to Western studies and losing one's roots" (p. 89), nevertheless, they found their influence waning and Chinese was relegated to the status of a foreign language in the new curriculum of the Franco-Vietnamese educational system. Ironically, the French occupation gave the Vietnamese intelligentsia access to Western science and literature which ultimately sowed the seeds of French defeat. Wardhaugh (1987) argues that it was because the cultural claims contained in French literature failed to match the oppressive colonial system imposed on the Vietnamese. However, the Vietnamese intelligentsia still felt powerless to implement their new found knowledge. As Marr (1981) explains:

> What every member of the intelligentsia wanted was a set of beliefs that both explained reality and provided the means to alter it. However, each time the emphasis shifted from the absorbing of new facts and theories to their imaginative application to local conditions, a formidable obstacle emerged: all conventional forms of action were monopolised or guarded jealously by the French and their native subordinates (p. 329).

Ultimately it was Marxism which provided the intellectual rallying point against the French forces. The Vietnamese communists defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, after which the Geneva Agreement was signed, dividing Vietnam into north and south. One of the conditions of the Agreement was that nationwide elections be held. However, the leader of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, failed to honour that promise. The resulting tensions finally escalated into the Vietnam War in which the south received backing from the USA and her allies, while the north received assistance from the Soviet Union and China.

Since the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, the Hanoi-based National Institute for Educational Research set targets for foreign language teaching in Vietnamese high schools, aiming to have 60% study Russian, 25% study English and 15% study French. Although these targets were not fully achieved, Russian remained the dominant foreign language, especially in the north, until 1989 when *doi moi* heralded the ascendancy of English (Denham, 1992).

It has been argued that the combination of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism has established the core values and behavioural norms of the Vietnamese. In respect of education, it has given rise to a strong emphasis on examinations with attention given to perfection of the written form. The French gave the Vietnamese the alphabet and exposed them to Western ideas, inadvertently, as it were, giving them the intellectual tools to challenge traditions. Nevertheless, there still remains a considerable disparity between the core values and behavioural norms of Western and Vietnamese culture.

How these differences are manifested in teacher/student interactions will be the subject of the next section.

Cultural Differences in Teacher/Student Interactions

At the heart of Vietnamese teaching practices lies a conformist view of the teacher/student relationship. According to Phuoc (1975), the nature of the teaching and leaning styles in Vietnam stems from the Confucian tradition that students paid homage first to Confucius, then to their school-masters, who were Confucius's living representatives (p. 107). In fact, students were even urged to afford their teachers the same respect as a ruler or a father as the following traditional poem suggests:

> *Vua, thay, cha, ay ba ngoi,*
> *Kinh tho nhu mot, tre oi ghi long.*
> [The King, the teacher, the father occupy three different positions; but children, remember that you should venerate them equally as one unified person] (Phuoc, 1975, p. 106).

Phuoc claims that the Confucian model is teacher-centred, closed, suspicious of creativity, and predicated on an unquestioning obedience from the students. In cases where the students fail to comply with this code of conduct and become so-called "discipline problems", he suggests that the teacher will actively inhibit the student's creativity. Conversely, the students might reserve their own opinions to save the face of the teacher, even when they are aware that the teacher is wrong. Nguyen (1986) gives an interesting example to illustrate this point. During teaching rounds, the supervising teachers would often complain about mispronunciations of their student teachers when in fact the student teachers had been quite correct. Nguyen attributes this simply to inadequate training on the part of the older language teachers, but fails to take issue with the fact that these older teachers were not challenged over their inaccuracy.

Another feature of the Vietnamese teacher/student interactions which Nguyen (1986) noticed, was the importance placed on the rote learning individual words. Marr (1981) offers an historical perspective, claiming that the "articulations of individual sounds" figured prominently in the language teaching style of the 1930s (p. 3). What is of more significance and what the literature review reveals is the decontextualized nature of words as they are presented in the EFL classroom. Nguyen (1988) attributes this to the traditional educational objective *Tien hoc le* (learn morality first). Traditionally, the teacher was obliged to use vocabulary which would reflect the moral content of education and quite often this was manifested in the rote learning of Confucian proverbs with no point of reference for young students. As Nguyen explains:

> With such words and sentences, children found it difficult to understand their meanings. They had to memorise and regurgitate them to their teacher when asked. The students considered intelligent were the ones who learnt by heart the most words and sentences from books (p. 20).

This is not to suggest that Vietnamese language teaching practices have remained static. Marr (1981) notes that, during the 1930s, the Association for the Dissemination of Quoc Ngu Study broke away from the traditional method of making the students recite the spelling of each word. Instead, students were encouraged to sound out words by syllables with the aid of poetry. Because Vietnamese is a phonetic language, mastering the relationship between sound and script led to correct spelling. Lesson content, however, remained decontextualized. As Marr points out, the bulk of material "continued to uphold the virtues of diligence, neatness and social harmony" (p. 182).

The literature also points to the importance of discourse styles in understanding cultural differences in teacher/student interactions. According to Bochner (1986) the directness of Western discourse styles might be viewed by the Vietnamese as "rude and uncouth". Conversely, the unquestioning obedience of the Vietnamese, from a Western perspective, might be seen as passivity, insincerity and stupidity. Even something as simple as a smile

can cause cross-cultural friction. In Vietnam a smile may "signify not wishing to contradict a higher-status person, or merely a lack of understanding about what is being said" (p. 99).

There are also variations between Eastern and Western traditions in styles of argumentation. Western styles are "linear", Oriental styles are marked by "circular arrangements" which to the uninitiated composition teacher could seem rather pointless (Damen, p. 307). As Nguyen (1991) has observed, good writing in Vietnamese is demonstrated by slowly approaching the main point. Vietnamese rarely use a direct approach in their communication, as it is regarded as blunt and rude. On the other hand, Western societies such as the USA and Australia appreciate directness (in Denham, 1992). The linear form of Western texts also allows for a higher degree of abstraction which has led to a separation of author from text. As such, Western texts can be critically analysed and publicly challenged. By contrast, traditional cultures have created and handed down texts which are of "transcendental character and therefore are unchangeable and of eternal validity" (Osterloh, 1980, p. 82). Due to the close relationship between author and text the opinions of the author are thought to be beyond reproach. Osterloh points out that this has led to difficulties for students from traditional cultures in forming their own opinions. Any dissenting opinions could potentially undermine an individual's "right to be a member of a group" (p. 81). As a result, no one would be likely to venture an opinion without first consulting the relevant authority.

In Vietnam, the thoughts and observations of venerated authors fully occupied the minds of young and old students alike and would be quoted as a sign of wisdom. As Nguyen (1988) suggests, "their own thoughts, if any, had been stilled and had no room in their lives". What great authors, such as Confucius, had said was incontestable. For Nguyen, this is why the Vietnamese student "finds it easy to imitate, but difficult to do creative works" (p. 20). Phuoc (1975) also notes this tendency:

> ... many foreign observers point out that there is in Vietnamese a lack of imagination and inventiveness and a tendency for imitation and indiscriminate borrowing rather than for creativeness (p. 108).

Several writers have suggested a number of conceptual tools which explain behavioural norms in terms of the value orientations of a particular culture. One such tool centres on the power-distance relationships between the members of society (Hofstede, 1980, 1986) which, for the purpose of this study, helps explain the conformist teacher/student relationship in Vietnam. Another useful framework is the collectivistic contrasted with the individualistic background of people from different cultures (Hofstede, 1980, 1986). Next, the "concept of face" which helps explain behavioural norms, especially in cultures influenced by Confucianism (Wei, 1977; Hwang, 1986). One final avenue to explore is the hierarchical function of linguistic devices in defining and reinforcing the relative status of different social groups. In particular, the Vietnamese system of pronouns. (Marr, 1981).

Power Distance

In a comparative study of culture within a large multinational organisation, Hofstede (1980) uncovered four dimensions of cultural variability, one of which was the large versus small power distance between members. As Hofstede puts it:

> Power distance is the extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organisations is distributed unequally. This affects the behaviour of the less powerful as well as the more powerful members of society. People in large power distance societies accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place which needs no further justification. (p. 83).

This dimension is important for the purpose of this study because samples taken from countries which share a Confucianist tradition with Vietnam all indicated a large power distance. The fact that these countries are in a stage of rapid modernisation does not appear to have undermined the fundamental Confucian values informing social relationships (Hwang, 1986). By contrast, Australia, along with most other Western

societies, is designated as having small power-distance relationships. More importantly, Hofstede (1986) found that power-distance variability influences the nature of the teacher/student relationship (see Table 1).

TABLE 1

Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Power Distance Dimension

SMALL POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES	LARGE POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES
• stress on impersonal "truth" which can in principle be obtained from any competent person	• stress on personal "wisdom" which is transferred in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru)
• a teacher should respect the independence of his/her students	• a teacher merits the respect of his/her students
• student-centred education (premium on initiative)	• teacher-centred education (premium on order)
• teacher expects students to initiate communication	• students expect teacher to initiate communication
• teacher expects students to find their own paths	• Students expect teacher to outline paths to follow
• students may speak up spontaneously in class	• Students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher
• students allowed to contradict or criticise teacher	• teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticised
• effectiveness of learning related to amount of two-way communication in class	• effectiveness of learning related to excellence of the teacher
• outside class. teachers are treated as equals	• respect for teachers is also shown outside class
• in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the student	• in teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher
• younger teachers are more liked than older teachers	• older teachers are more respected than younger teachers

Reprinted from: Hofstede, G. (1986). Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 10, pp. 301-320.

Collectivism

Hofstede (1980) found that most traditional societies in the South East Asian area were collectivist and, as might be expected, most Western societies, including Australia, are individualistic. For Hofstede, collectivism is characterised by a tightly knit collection of clannish groups, all uniformly labelled and arranged hierarchically according to social standing. Each in-group protects the interests of its members, but in return expects their on going loyalty. An individualist society, by contrast, is loosely integrated and assumes

that a person looks primarily after his/her own self interest and the interest of his/her immediate family. As with power-distance, this also has ramifications for the teacher/student relationship (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Individualism versus Collectivism Dimension

COLLECTIVIST SOCIETIES	INDIVIDUALIST SOCIETIES
• positive association in society with whatever is rooted in tradition	• positive association in society with whatever is "new"
• the young should learn; adults cannot accept student role	• one is never too old to learn; "permanent education"
• students expect to learn how to do	• students expect to learn how to learn
• individual students will only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher	• individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher
• individuals will only speak up in small groups	• individuals will speak up in large groups
• large classes split socially into smaller, cohesive subgroups based on particularist criteria (e.g. ethnic affiliation)	• sub groupings in class vary from one situation to the next based on universalist criteria (e.g. the task "at hand")
• formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained al all times (T-groups are taboo)	• confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought into the open
• neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face	• face-consciousness is weak
• education is a way of gaining prestige in one's social environment and of joining a higher status group ("a ticket to a ride")	• education is a way of improving one's economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence
• diploma certificates are important and displayed on walls	• diploma certificates have little symbolic value
• acquiring certificates. even through illegal means (cheating, corruption)is more important than acquiring competence	• acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates
• teachers are expected to give preferential treatment Io some students (e.g. based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person)	• teachers are expected to be strictly impartial

Reprinted from: Hofstede, G. (1986). Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 10, pp. 301-320.

The Concept of Face

The Vietnamese traditionally do not reveal any of their problems to outsiders because such a revelation is viewed as a sign of weakness. Problems are solved within the family, and exposure of them to non-family members is considered shameful not only for the individual, but also for the family, and even for the entire nation. This characteristic of

"face-saving" has led to much confusion and misunderstanding between Vietnamese and Westerners (Wei, 1977).

Not only is it important to save one's own face, but also to save another's face. As was stated earlier, in a traditional society where the importance of structural harmony within a group is emphasised, every individual has to concern him or herself with the appropriate conduct in maintaining one's place in a hierarchical order. As Hwang (1986) points out, "he or she must pay attention to preserving other's face in social encounters, especially the face of superiors" (p. 248). What constitutes a "desirable face" in the teacher/student relationship, however, is culturally more specific. Thus, it seems that in a large power distance society such as Vietnam, one's face is more interconnected with that of others, and its protection more disciplined by concerns about hierarchical order, than in a more egalitarian individualistic society such as Australia.

Linguistic Devices

With the demise of French as "mode of higher communication", the Vietnamese intellectuals explored the depth and beauty of their own literary traditions. Marr (1981) notes that the literati of the 1920s and 1930s had a consuming passion for words, "they were quite convinced that words must be used correctly in order to communicate properly and hence foster appropriate conduct" (p. 138). The tendency was further fuelled by a newly found belief in the objectivity of science and the recognition that Vietnamese (*quoc ngu*) was an important part of national identity.

One element the Vietnamese intellectuals grappled with, but never resolved, was the power of the system of pronouns which were used for the purpose of distinguishing different status. As Marr has observed, the fact that status was a fundamental to the Vietnamese language is reflected in the absence of a pronoun for "you", and avoidance of using "I". Instead, "I" and "you" have various words and meanings depending on the person's rank in the family, age, social class, job function, gender or moral judgement (p.

171). Although the Vietnamese intellectuals of the 1930s were aware of the role of language as both an inhibitor and agent of social change, "no one seems to have proposed that the traditional hierarchical kinship terminology be altered fundamentally" (p. 174). In fact, under communism, "the requirement to impose clear cut labels was reimposed with a vengeance" (p. 175).

Whether of the old Confucian style or the Marxist-Leninist variety, the power-distance between teacher and student, the collectivist nature of social groups, the need to save face, and finally the confirmatory messages in the system of pronouns have all served to perpetuate the conformist teacher/student relationship in Vietnam.

Intercultural Communication

Among the roles ascribed to the "Western" ESL or EFL teacher are teacher and model of the language, representative and interpreter of his or her culture, learning facilitator, friend and counsellor. All of these roles have cultural dimensions and are to some extent defined by the expectations and interactions between the teacher and the language learner. This raises the question of transferability between cultures, in particular, whether there are universal generalisations pertaining to a communicative theory of practice that transcend the individual and specific groups or cultures. It is with this in mind that I will turn to the literature on intercultural communication.

The indivisibility of language, culture and thought has been postulated by a number of authors. Within this view, Vygotsky (1979) claims that the individual and the social context are mutually constitutive elements of a single interacting system, and cognitive development is a process of acquiring culture. As Hall (1977) has observed, during the period of enculturation the nature of culture is such that it frames or limits the number of stimuli to which a person much respond in a particular communication transaction. He

refers to this cultural preprogramming as "*contexting*" (p. 85), or as Damen (1987) puts it, "the ability of the human brain to supply details when they are not present" (p. 78). Indeed, the process of interpreting the total meaning attached to a communication transaction is assisted by a number of contextual cues, such as the relationship between the sender and the receiver, the nonverbal expressions of the communicators, the physical environment and the social circumstances.

Hall (1977) makes one further observation which has significance for this study, namely the notion of high-context and low-context messages. For Hall, high context communication describes a situation where most of the information is either in the physical context or encoded in the communicators' body language. In low context communication the reverse is true, namely the bulk of the information is encoded in the language. Bernstein (1966) draws a similar distinction between high and low context messages, referring to them respectively as "restricted and elaborated codes of language". He states that:

> ... the speech is played out against a backdrop of assumptions common to the speakers, against a set of closely shared interests and identifications, against a system of shared expectations; in short, it presupposes a local cultural identity which reduces the need for the speakers to elaborate their intent verbally and to make it explicit (in Damen, 1987, p. 79).

Given that cultural phenomena, such as values and beliefs, vary between high and low context cultures and are imprinted in the meaning of their respective language codes, then it is reasonable to assume that there will be differences between the phenomenological experiences of individuals from those two cultures. In other words, the meaning of words each culture derives from a language is greatly dependent on the cultural life in which the speakers of that language live. As Bloom (June, 1990) points out, "a number of factors other than semantic knowledge affect the construction of meaning", and these include "personal experiences, metaphors, interpretive frameworks, and emotions-values-aesthetics" (p. 1).

Whilst the literature indicates that different constructions of meaning, comprising idiosyncratic concepts (*emics)*, exist across cultures, as Brislin (1993) explains, "there will most likely be different aspects of a concept that serve the same purpose in different cultures" (p. 81). In cross-cultural analysis the aim is to look for equivalent concepts (*etics*), then identify the culture-specific or *emic* aspects that are related to the *etic* in the various cultures under study. For example, an *etic* aspect of intelligence might be "pr[illegible]m solving", which manifests itself in various *emics* according to the particular culture. In Western countries one *emic* of intelligence is quickness, while among the Baganda of East Africa a sign of intelligence is slow and careful thought (ibid). LeVine (1984) gives the example of the Gussi culture in which there is a lexicon of distinctively mental phenomena and a framework for conceptualising mental processes, particularly their subjective aspects, which is beyond the categories of Western psychologies.

The general view of Far Eastern cultures is that they are typically high context, and therefore more traditional, slow to change and highly stable, whereas the low context cultures of the Western World are associated with technological, fast-paced and less stable groups (Hofstede, 1980; Damen, 1987), and although it is not the purpose of this study to imply a clear distinction between Eastern and Western cultures, for many of these cultural differences are disappearing with the globalisation of economies, there is still considerable support for the proposition that culture does affect the processes by which one learns.

The sorting out of the relationship between language, culture, and world view, has been a source of controversy among some researchers ever since the celebrated Sapir-Whorf or Whorfian hypothesis which is as follows:

> We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar, or can in some way be calibrated (in Damen 1987, p. 125).

The central idea underpinning Whorf's hypothesis is that language functions not simply as a tool for expressing experience, but also as a means of defining experience for its speakers. In other words, "speakers of different languages viewed the world in different ways" (ibid. p. 128). More recently, scholars have rejected the more deterministic version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in favour of one which supports linguistic relativity (Bloom, 1984). According to Gudykunst and Kim:

> ... the true value of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is not in providing a definitive and deterministic relationship between specific linguistic categories and the thought patterns of people in a cultural system but in articulating the profound alliance of language, mind, and the total culture of the speech community (in Damen, p. 130).

As Bloom (1984) points out, once a linguistic form or label has been mastered, it can trigger in the mind of the receiver the specific cognitive schemas associated with those labels, thereby not only providing a certain level of comprehension of the speech act, but also giving cues as to further thought processing with respect to it. However, he cautions that, in cross-cultural situations, a language transaction of this kind is subject to the "intervening factors which may, for better or worse, derail from its intended result" (p. 276). For example, in a comparative study on family relations in Thailand and the USA, Phillips (1960) reported difficulty in translating "sometimes a good quarrel is necessary" into Thai. The problem lay in the American concept that a good quarrel has a kind of cathartic effect, whereas in Thailand this *emic* of the more general concept of husband/wife disagreements is unthinkable (in Brislin, 1993, p. 81).

Bloom's point also helps to explain the possible misunderstandings common to the EFL situation, in so far as it can be expected that the EFL learner will interpret English words in terms of the meanings residing in the corresponding linguistic codes of their own language, even though at the level of *emics* there is no conceptual equivalence. Orton (1990), for example, in an extensive engagement with Chinese language teachers,

discovered that the same words, used cross-culturally, had quite different meanings and resulted in different practices. As she explains:

> The Chinese were claiming that their principles were being put into practice, so that verbally, at least, they shared my value of congruence. I could not imagine where one might be standing to view that practice as derived from those principles. It seemed they were either lying when they said they saw the principles and practice as congruent, or they were irrational and absurd, at least in my terms. Yet I did not think they were lying, and I could not believe they were irrational: neither idea fitted with other evidence from my experience. The only alternative was that there was some other way of viewing the world and behaviour which provided the link, but which I could not perceive. ... perhaps the words did not mean the same to them as they did to me, or perhaps this was the best they could do given other constraints, which they did not and perhaps could not, name (p. 55).

The concepts of culture and communication are seen to be intertwined in the process of communication and in the perceptions of the communicators. Problems arise in the EFL setting when there are differences in the way various cultures structure their knowledge and when the cultural values imprinted in the codes of the target language do not find resonance with the meaning systems of the second language learners.

I now turn to the question raised at the beginning of this section: Is the communicative approach culture specific, or does it contain universal generalisations about educational practices that transcend individual cultures? The literature indicates that different constructions of meaning or "meaning systems" exist across cultures which inhibit the transferability of particular pedagogical practices between the respective cultures. As Orton discovered, the acceptance of her methodology course in China implied not only a change in behaviour on the part of her Chinese participants, but also a change in their value orientation:

> On reflection it seemed that for the Chinese to adopt the approach proposed, they would not only have to do more of, better and perhaps a little differently what they had always done, but to make radical changes to some of their basic beliefs, values and consequent ways of acting (p. 2).

Rather than trying to assimilate the Chinese EFL teachers to her own Western values, Orton's solution was to reframe the task in keeping with Chinese values. The result was a different form of the original practice, "based on a new relationship between teacher and student" (ibid). Significantly, her findings touch upon a fundamental aspect of learning concerning the need to make new knowledge sensitive to existing beliefs and values. As Damen (1987) explains, "learning involves the incorporating of new information into old sets of beliefs and knowledge for the purpose of maintaining a consistent world view" (p. 302).

The importance of making new knowledge attuned to the learner's world view is especially obvious where the reverse is true. In other words, where the disjuncture between the old set of beliefs and the new experience is too great. Jarvis (1986) claims that this produces passive resistance or non-learning in the student. In a quantitative study examining the perceptions of a group of foreign language students toward various teaching methods, Little and Sanders (1990) found that unfamiliar activities having a communicative or process orientation were not highly valued by students from traditional backgrounds. They concluded that too large a gap between the current level of performance and the intended learning experience would result in a breakdown of language production and frustration for the language learner.

One final piece of literature which should be mentioned here reports on the negative outcomes of learning a new culture. Kamm (1990) cites the example of the culture shock experienced by Vietnamese migrants after a period of six to twelve months in the USA. Faced with the realisation of the total disparity between what they have known before and their current lives, "the reaction may range from over-enthusiastic embrace of everything American to a dissatisfaction with everything" (p. 17). Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1983) refer to these two categories as "over-assimilation" and "self-segregation". I expected to find examples of these types of responses from the Vietnamese who attended the OSB workshops.

In conclusion, the literature on intercultural communication attests to the importance of understanding how our world view both shapes and is shaped by language and how this can lead to a disorienting dilemma in cross-cultural interactions. In terms of introducing the communicative approach to Vietnam, one obvious source of friction would be the beliefs and values encoded in the methodology. In particular, the constitutive relationship between the teacher and student. As Hart (1990) points out, education cannot step outside "power bound forms of interaction and intrapsychic distortions affecting learners and educators alike" (p. 136).

So far this literature review has attempted to provide the theoretical tools for examining the cultural orientations of the Vietnamese, however the picture would not be complete without taking into account how individuals working in cross-cultural settings apply their cultural knowledge.

Culture Learning and Management

In reviewing the literature on problems faced by an individual acting in a cross-cultural capacity, the field of social psychology offered some promise by pointing the way for one line of questioning pursued during the case study interviews. In particular, the work of Stephen Bochner (1982) who proposes a model of cross-cultural interaction (see Table 3).

TABLE 3

Outcomes of cultural contact at the individual level: psychological responses to "second culture" influences

Response	Type	Multiple group membership affiliation	Effect on individual	Effect on society
Reject culture of origins embrace second culture	Passing	Culture I norms lose salience Culture II norms become salient	Loss of ethnic identity Self-denigration	Assimilation Cultural erosion
Reject second culture, exaggerate first culture	Chauvinistic	Culture I norms increase in salience Culture II norms decrease in salience	Nationalism Racism	Intergroup friction
Vacillate between the two cultures	Marginal	Norms of both cultures salient but perceived as mutually incompatible	Conflict Identity confusion Over-compensation	Reform Social change
Synthesize both cultures	Mediating	Norms of both cultures salient and perceived as capable of being integrated	Personal growth	Intergroup harmony Pluralistic societies Cultural preservation

Reprinted from Bochner, S. (1982). *Cultures in Contact: Studies in Cross Cultural Interaction*. Oxford: Pergamon Press. p. 27.

Drawing upon research studies carried out in cross-cultural contact situations such as Peace Corps workers abroad, foreign students in the USA, and intergroup contacts in Australia, Bochner suggests four types of psychological responses to the second culture that depend upon the relationships of cultural groups as insiders and outsiders in the society in question, or as he puts it, "the extent to which the participants emerge from the contact having rejected or exaggerated their first culture, rejected or exaggerated their "second" culture, vacillated between the two, or synthesised them" (p. 28).

For the purpose of this study, Bochner's (1986) account of the young Americans teaching for the Peace Corps is analogous to that of the OSB instructors in Vietnam. Both cases deal with individuals who choose to work in foreign countries to provide

training for people in need of assistance. Specifically, Bochner focuses on the teacher's group reference and experience of cultural difference, two factors that are built into the present study as definers of the OSB instructors' perspective on the cultural appropriateness of communicative language teaching. Furthermore, he stresses that the teachers tend to be either "marginal" or "mediating" in that they deliberately set out to "reduce the social distance between themselves and their clients" (p, 136), a factor I expected the OSB instructors to report.

The interaction between the OSB volunteers and their Vietnamese clients, which Bochner would analyse in group membership terms, would be interpreted through what was said and how it was said by sociolinguistic analysis. Within this discipline Gumperez (1982), maintains that many difficulties in cross-cultural interactions arise from a wide variety of misunderstood cues, conventions and organising features of discourse. It has already been argued that some of these difficulties are due to *contexting* which can make intercultural communication quite a complex and even bewildering act even between two fluent speakers. As Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1983) point out, knowledge of a culture and sometimes even mastery of specific behaviours, does not necessarily lead to well functioning communication. Brislin (1993) adds that when people observe behaviours which differ from what they expect in their everyday life, they tend to make judgements and draw conclusions in order to make sense of their observations. These judgements about the causes of behaviour are known as *attributions* and can lead to misunderstandings even at the most basic level, for example nodding the head means "yes" or "no" depending on the culture.

What Brislin suggests is to search for opportunities to make *isomorphic attributions* which refers to "the ability to make the *same* attribution as the *other* person in the interaction" (p. 41). Similarly, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson suggest communicating within the framework of a so called "interculture" (p. 71), which would combine compatible elements from both cultures. As with Bochner's category of "mediating", the

use of interculture would have a synthesising effect by trying to fit contradicting norms together.

In conclusion, because English language teachers in foreign settings are operating through language to teach language, intercultural communication theory would lead us to expect many misunderstandings between the OSB instructors and the Vietnamese trainees. Indeed, it could even be expected that lack of metacommunicative and metacultural awareness may prevent the instructors from applying their linguistic or cultural knowledge and behaving in a culturally acceptable manner. Forms of discourse, complicated by sociocultural expectations and assumptions that are often unconscious, make intercultural communication quite a complex task even where no language barriers exist. This leads to the proposition that teachers serving abroad, faced with learning a new culture, will often misunderstand and be misunderstood by their host clients in spite of communicative competence. It is hoped that the case study will to some extent provide examples of misunderstandings arising from cultural differences.

This review of the literature was intended to survey and discuss how the research problem at hand has been addressed previously. The case study, which reports on the appropriateness of introducing the communicative approach to Vietnam , offers the opportunity to explore the role of intercultural communication in framing the experiences of the three Australian informants.

CHAPTER 3 THE STUDY

This chapter sets out how the difficulties encountered in transferring the communicative approach to Vietnam came to be framed as a research problem. The approach taken in the interviews and the data analysis are explained. The interviews and their function in shaping the main study along with the rationale for selecting informants is also explained. Finally, the advantages and limitations of adopting such an approach are outlined concerning the sort of findings a study of this type can produce and the conclusions which could be drawn from them.

The Approach

Embarking with the expressed intent to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of intercultural communication, I sought information and experience from three of the Australian OSB teachers who had been involved in the workshops. I had reasoned that their respective roles immersed them daily in cross-cultural experiences and I felt that something important could come from in-depth interviews centring on their perceptions of the appropriateness of the communicative approach in Vietnam.

It was from a careful examination of the three interviews that I came to realise the differences that separated interviews from dialogues and it was this understanding that set me on a course of research which centres on the discovery of meaning and the surfacing of the possibilities of meaning. I was also guided by the conviction that somewhere within an understanding of how cross-cultural experiences are actually experienced, the embedded meanings would explain the seeming contradictions between the Western and Vietnamese construction of reality.

The Informants

Practical considerations in this study included recruiting the three Australian informants, recording and collecting data and finding a 'gatekeeper' to facilitate the classroom observation in Vietnam. The informants were referred to me by former Vietnamese OSB workshop participants and subsequently contacted by telephone and invited to participate. In terms of ethical considerations, anonymity and confidentiality of their statements were promised when they signed a written consent form (see Appendix B).

The rationale for selecting the informants was based on Patton's "maximum variation sampling" (in Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 200). Limited time and resources precluded using a larger sample, however, the three subjects chosen for this study represented a broad range in terms of their role within OSB, their years of experience and locations where they were assigned in Vietnam. The first subject I interviewed was a full time employee of OSB, the second a consultant and the third a volunteer.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "the purpose of maximum variation is best achieved by selecting each unit of the sample only after the previous unit has been tapped and analysed" (p. 201). In this study each subject was obtained by personal nomination followed by a pilot interview conducted on the telephone. The main interviews took place at Hawthorn Institute of Education in Melbourne between September and November 1993. In the case of Michael, the interview took place one week after his return from Vietnam and in the case of the other two informants there was a gap of approximately one month. All three reported that the interviews served as a type of debriefing for them, giving them the opportunity to organise and reflect on their thoughts.

The Method

This study is an example of naturalistic inquiry in the sense that it attempts to give the reader a "thick description" of the setting from an insider's perspective. From the outset, I firmly believed that the nature of the research problem could best be addressed by in-depth interviewing. Spradley (1979) offered a useful framework for the interviewing, Bogdan and Biklen (1992) provided a model for the data analysis and finally Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided the rules for trustworthy reporting.

The field study in Vietnam gave me first hand knowledge of the educational environment and an opportunity to observe how the communicative approach translates into practice. The themes generated in the interviews with the Australian informants were mooted with the Vietnamese participants, and where relevant, those comments were cited in the case study. Due to the politically sensitive nature of discussing structural problems in education with foreigners, none of the dialogues with the Vietnamese was tape recorded. As one Vietnamese said. "I want to be frank with you, so please no tape recorder". I respected their situation and resolved to rely on my field notes to recreate their sentiments.

Following the advice of Spradley (1979), the three Australian informants were told about the purpose of the study and questions were explained during each interview. The assumption was that through the informants' descriptions of activities and structures and through contrast and comparison of the elements described, the underlying meaning that practices hold for the informants will be expressed in their own terminology to the researcher who will uncover it through analysis. The informants' explanation for cultural elements is part of the context within which they construct their social reality, and the reality construction related by an informant is more than simply one perspective on that context. Ultimately, each account forms a part of the context and at the same time is shaped by it. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out, "no phenomenon can be

understood out of relationship to the time and context that spawned, harboured and supported it" (p. 189).

In naturalistic inquiry, the researcher functions as the research instrument and although this approach has its limitations, Lincoln and Guba argue it is still the "only one available of grasping all this buzzing confusion [of a natural setting] in one view" (p. 192). Furthermore, it is the only approach that addresses the set of understandings in the research process that cannot be defined in terms of propositional knowledge, a dimension often referred to as "tacit knowledge" (p. 195). As Lincoln and Guba point out, "tacit knowledge must not only be admitted but is in fact an indispensable part of the research process" for it "becomes the base on which the human instrument builds many of the insights and hypotheses that will eventually develop" (p. 198).

As an ESL teacher of Asian adults myself, my tacit knowledge fostered a relationship of reciprocal and open inquiry with my research subjects. Besides eliciting information from the informants, in keeping with the reflective principles of ethnographic interview techniques (Spradley, 1979), I sometimes voiced my own interpretations or offered contextual information when asking structural questions. Spradley refers to this practice as "placing the informant in a setting where the domain is relevant" (p. 124) He adds that it also avoids the risk of boredom and tediousness that comes from a series of short descriptive questions. In my case, I cited the experiences of Jane Orton (1990) who remarked on the contradiction between the claims of her Chinese research subjects, that they were applying the principles of the communicative approach, and the actual practice. The only conclusion she could draw was that she was dealing with a "quite different reality" which posed considerable problems in terms of cooperation and mutual understanding" (p. 55). Owing to the strong cultural links between China and Vietnam, I anticipated that Jane Orton's example would help my informants make sense out of their own experiences.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), "analysis is shaped both by the researcher's perspectives and theoretical positions" (p. 175). In my case, informal discussions with Vietnamese teachers led me to foreshadow many of the problems associated with implementing the communicative approach, and Bochner's model of cross-cultural interaction supplied the theoretical framework for evaluating the cultural perspectives of my informants. I expected that their role perceptions would range between "marginal" and "mediating", but I did not know how this would be expressed. Therefore, I kept my questions open-ended and allowed themes and categories to emerge. Following the advice of Bogdan and Biklen, I played with metaphors and analogies used by the informants and recorded them in a field diary. This enabled me to make connections with other settings and other experiences. Indeed, using metaphors often captured the spirit of categories I was developing.

The data analysis phase involves systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts and field notes. Bogdan and Biklen suggest looking for certain regularities and patterns which can later be developed into coding categories. Although I was mindful of the subjective nature of coding, remembering a comment by Spradley that "it is possible to analyse any phenomenon in more than one way" (p. 92), I was nevertheless confident that if I followed the rules for fieldwork established by Lincoln and Guba (1986), my perspective would at least be credible.

In planning and executing the fieldwork, the techniques proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1986) for meeting the criteria of trustworthiness and how I adopted them are as follows:

(i) For credibility: Cross-checking of data, peer debriefing and member checks. Although I only interviewed three OSB instructors, I did examine some of the prescribed EFL texts for Vietnamese high schools and materials from the workshops. I also

conducted classroom observation with three Vietnamese EFL teachers who had formerly attended the workshops run by my informants.

I was debriefed on two occasions by Phan Hoang Quy, the head of the English Department at the University of Education Ho Chi Minh City. Once before my round of classroom observation and once afterwards. He also acted as a sounding board for the informants assessment of the situation in Vietnam and my interpretations of their responses at the cultural level.

In terms of member checks, I had informal discussions with the informants by telephone in the two months following the interviews.

(ii) For confirmability: I maintained field notes of lesson observations and any comments from the Vietnamese I came in contact with relating to cultural differences. Cassette tapes are available to confirm all of the interviews with the three Australian informants, along with typed transcriptions. The source of each quotation as in the informant's name, page reference and line number is embedded in the text to serve as an audit trail (see Appendix A)

(iii) For transferability: I developed as much narrative about the context within the limitations of this study. However, transferability of findings ultimately depends on the degree of fit or similarity made by others who might wish to apply the findings elsewhere.

(iv) For authenticity: I tried to include a range of constructions of the situation under investigation and the values that underpin them in order to present a balanced view.

Conclusion

In summary, I chose to undertake an inquiry which focussed on the views of my informants concerning the appropriateness of the communicative approach in Vietnam, and how they interpreted and negotiated cultural differences as an element of their work. In the process, I hoped to provide examples of the conflict between collectivism and individualism and also find some resonance with Bochner's categories of psychological responses to "second culture" influences. I drew on the writings of Spradley (1979), Bogdan and Biklen (1992) and Lincoln and Guba (1985, 1986) to provide the method of conducting the study and presenting the findings in an academic form. The two specific questions to which I was seeking an answer were first, that the communicative approach as practised in Australia is unsuitable for Vietnamese conditions and social relations, and second, that Vietnamese teaching practices are best understood in terms of the norms and traditions of Vietnamese society. Finally, I stress that the findings are value-laden with my own perspective. All that can be hoped is that the "thick description" may make possible a judgement of transferability to another context.

CHAPTER 4 THE CASE STUDY

This chapter presents an analysis of the interview data. The three informants' accounts will be examined to ascertain whether their perceptions of the problems associated with communicative language teaching in Vietnam match those anticipated in the literature review. While there was consensus among the informants as to the types of problems faced by the Vietnamese teachers, there was diversity in terms of cultural understanding and, as was anticipated, intercultural communication played a significant role in shaping that understanding.

What then is culture for these three Australian instructors? They use the term loosely to refer to social structures and practices, but mainly only in order to highlight cultural differences. For example, when Julie says "this would be a culture [*sic*] thing", she is referring to a mode of behaviour which cannot be explained in terms of her own culture. Practices that are specifically Australian are also part of what is cultural for the instructors, as is evidenced by Michael's comment:

> Like in our [Australian] culture we can cut through the levels a lot more quickly if we have known somebody in the past, whereas in Vietnam you've got to go through the "rungs" again.

Overwhelmingly, the informants showed awareness of the close relationship between language and culture. Alison voiced a typical perspective when she said that "language learning is learning about culture" (A-3-2). However, because Western cultural values are so embedded in the English language, it was not always possible to separate the two for discussion on Vietnamese culture. For the informants, this resulted in some attributions about certain behaviour which differed from the psychological map of the Vietnamese drawn in the literature review.

The rest of this chapter is an analysis of the informants' views on the problems associated with implementing the communicative approach, and their perspectives on the cultural aspects of EFL teaching in Vietnam. In the first section, the influences of traditions on Vietnamese language teaching practices are explored. Hofstede's (1986) models will be used as a framework for explaining cultural differences observed by the informants (see Tables 1 and 2). Their use of language to explain Vietnamese behaviour will be analysed in terms of *contexting* (Damen, 1987) and "attribution theory" (Brislin, 1993). Finally, their attempts to bridge the cultural gap will be framed within Bochner's (1982) categories of "marginal" and "mediating" (see Table 3).

The Influence of Traditions

History can be interpreted in many ways. All the same those wishing to understand current language teaching practices in Vietnam would do well to study the past. Only by peeling back the layers of cultural influence can one fully appreciate the complexity of Vietnamese social interactions. Take for example the Vietnamese attitude towards texts. First, there is the "Chinese Confucian layer" which explains the reluctance to criticise texts in terms of veneration for the author. The next wave of influence, under French colonialism, saw literary criticism and public debate flourish. Most recently, under the "Neo-Stalinist" influence, there is a return to an atmosphere of reluctance to criticise, not because of respect for the author, but rather due to a fear and mistrust of authorities.

The legacy of the Chinese influence in Vietnam is particularly noticeable in the ritualistic elements in the practice of mastering linguistic forms and can be traced back to the practice of rote learning Chinese ideographs. In the case of English language teaching, it has resulted in the strict observance of grammatical rules. However, this approach contrasts strongly with the communicative approach which stresses that the student should first cope with the communicative task before being given the grammatical form.

In Michael's words: "Whenever the grammar lesson is given [the idea is] that you elicit grammar rules from usage rather than teach a grammar rule and then practice it" (M-7-54). The tension between the two perspectives was manifested in the tacit pressure upon the OSB instructors to always give grammatical explanations. Alison recounts one of her experiences in the workshop:

> Being asked a lot of questions about grammar and answering them with, "well in actual fact, I don't know the answer to the grammar and in fact that's not really important. What's important is meaning and communicating meaning" and that was fairly shocking for a lot of the Vietnamese secondary school teachers and we deliberately set out to do that (A-9-19).

Julie makes the same point when she says that "they're [the Vietnamese language teachers] trying to push the message to match the structure" (J-15-1)

The propensity of the Vietnamese for using grammar as a starting point in language learning stems from a long standing tradition of memorising linguistic forms and, according to Michael, is still a strong characteristic of their learning style:

> They are fabulous at rote learning and (...) it's a banner that they hold proudly. They've got memories like steel traps (M-7-40).

It should be remembered that rote learning was also a common feature of foreign language learning in Western countries before the 1970s, but has since been discredited. The contemporary view reflected in the informants comments is that fluency develops by a process of trial and error in an atmosphere where one is not being afraid to make mistakes, a point which Michael often discussed with the workshop participants:

> The concept that language is for communication and not for perfection, that they can actually communi ate and make mistakes and not feel bad about that. Those are the sorts of concerns that they have that come up every year (M-7-44).

Another feature of the Vietnamese learning style which caught the attention of the informants was the preoccupation with individual words, rather than overall meaning:

> Often the example that they're using to illustrate a point of grammar appears (...) maybe once in the text and (...) in a fairly unimportant part of the text. It's got nothing to do with actual looking at texts the way we look at texts in the holistic approach here in Australia. It's got more to do with breaking it down, like the old style of (...) looking word by word (M-2-8).

Julie reported the same phenomenon in her experiences with reading classes:

> Reading is communication but you've got to really understand it. You can't just parrot it and read individual words and say "well I know the individual meaning of every single word in that sentence" (J-12-29).

Michael and Julie's observations are supported by views expressed in the literature concerning the traditional practice of rote learning individual words removed from their original context. For Julie, this fascination with individual words is part of a much larger cultural phenomenon concerning the sanctity of text:

Julie: And next to none of them will use their own writing for students to model.

Greg: So it's just a lack of confidence in their own ability?

Julie: Yes and is it that though?

Greg: Well, that's what I want to find out. What could it be?

Julie: I think it's got something to do with, (...) and this would be a culture thing. What is written in a book is somehow sacred and above [pause]

Greg: Not to be challenged?

Julie: Well it's a model. Yes and what you do is not a model (...) and [text is] not to be challenged. Oh no (J-6-14).

The above extract illustrates an important cultural difference. Whilst the Western teacher has the confidence and authority to model language for the students, the Vietnamese teacher defers to the authority of the textbook. As the informants discovered, Vietnamese language teachers have relatively little freedom to deviate from the prescribed text. Not only because the examination reflects the text, but also because they would invariably meet with resistance from figures of authority:

> We know we're gonna get resistance. It's not only from our students who expect our answers to be the same as the answer book because the examination is what's all important, but also from principals and educational authorities (M-6-40).

Thus the textbook is the primary focus of the EFL class in Vietnam, as the following extract illustrates:

> (...) the text would be read aloud in class. Well, actually the students would pre-read the text, look up their dictionaries, look up the words in the back of the book. The text would be read aloud, the comprehension questions would be answered probably by the teacher, written on the board and the students would copy those down. Next lesson would be similar. The grammar aspects of the text would be then looked at, explained, not practised. The questions about that would then be answered by the teacher, written on the board, the students would then copy them down. More often than not the students would then go home and use their answer book, which is now being printed, and check if the teacher was right against what the answer book says. So yeah, I think there is difficulty with the teachers in using those books (M-3-51).

Michael went on to say that the most urgent need now is for new texts to be written which are conducive to teaching communicatively.

Certainly the texts are not geared towards communicative competence and nor do they stimulate constructive class discussions, but to change them is no simple task. So long as the materials are produced centrally without consulting teachers at the grass roots, and as long as there remains a pre-occupation with grammar and translation, then any

individual attempts at introducing communicative language teaching are somewhat superficial.

The Educational Landscape

Like many schools in Vietnam Le Quy Don High School in Ho Chi Minh City is a large French colonial building in an urban setting. The classrooms have high ceilings and fans. The large arched windows have no glass to keep out the bustling noise of the traffic outside. The average class size is around forty but can go as high as sixty. This makes it extremely difficult for students at the back of the class to hear the teacher and for the teacher to hear student responses. The students sit at their wooden desks in rows facing the front. Each classroom is stark with no pictures on the walls, only fitted with the bare essentials, such as a blackboard. Other resources, such as overhead projectors and cassette players are rare. Texts are printed on cheap recycled paper making photographs look blurred and uninteresting.

The instructors were well aware of the barriers to implementing the communicative approach in a typical Vietnamese classroom. Beside the more obvious constraints mentioned above, there is also the issue of the conformist teacher/student relationship. In Vietnam the teacher is designated by the pronoun *thay,* which traditionally was a polite form of addressing one's father, while the students are addressed as *em*, which means younger brother or sister. Language learning is very much teacher-centred with role expectations and appropriate behaviour clearly defined, as the informants reported:

> They've got the teacher at the front of the cart and the students following and so the degree of responsibility is completely inverted for the application of communicative language teaching principles at this point in time (A-5-48).
>
> [The student is] somebody who gives the right answer first off and as consistently as possible and has beautiful handwriting on the board. What they consider is polite [is somebody who] stands when the teacher comes in, stands up

> automatically when giving an answer, says it perfectly correctly grammatically. Perfect correct grammar is a very important yardstick for the Vietnamese (A-7-30).

> I think it's important to conform in Vietnam. It's very important not to be too different. To be a little bit different is respected and valued, but to be too different is a concern . The other thing is there's a feeling that authority is always right and age is always right. Older teachers have more respect and more authority. The principal most of all and usually the principals aren't ex-English language teachers (M-5-57).

For a young teacher to radically change the curriculum by introducing the communicative approach, a great deal of courage would be required, as it might be regarded as a challenge to the authority of the principal. Michael explains:

> They're worried about other social aspects of working in a small community or village community under a principal who has even more power and more respect than them and the principal may not understand their particular point of view (M-5-35).

There is a saying common in collectivist societies that the nail that sticks up gets hammered down, a characteristic which is manifested in the general reluctance on the part of the Vietnamese teachers to be experimental. In relation to the communicative approach, it has meant adopting only those teaching strategies which do not interfere with the goals and expectations set by the collective. Michael refers to these strategies as the "frilly bits":

> It's almost like they take the frilly bits, the exciting bits of the communicative methodology. Things that will automatically work for them, as I was saying, like "warmers", but because of the expectations of the parents [and] of the students they'll revert, I'm sure, to more traditional roles (M-7-11).

Not only is the language teacher restrained by social pressures, but also by the rigours of a centrally controlled curriculum. On any given day throughout Vietnam, every high school teacher is expected to cover the same unit from the prescribed text. The methods of presentation, while influenced by the texts, are largely dictated by the content of the

examination at the end of each semester. In these examinations the language used is entirely literary and does not require a knowledge of what we might call the demotic elements of language which the communicative approach necessarily implies. Reconsidered in this light, the duty of the EFL teacher is to focus on the development of translation skills. In each unit there is a set list of vocabulary and the grammatical points to be learned, and as one teacher explained, there is a constant fear of falling behind if too much time is spent on developing oral communication skills. Furthermore, communicative activities often require planning and additional resources, and because teachers often run evening classes to supplement their incomes, there is little time remaining for preparation. One final point about the place of English in the school curriculum is the relative importance given to it by the students themselves. Several university students informed me that during high school they were preoccupied with passing mathematics and science, and that it was not until later that they realised the value of English, in particular, the ability to communicate.

A further barrier to adopting communicative language teaching, reported by the informants, was the Vietnamese teachers' lack of confidence in their own language ability:

> They're very reluctant to do any of the speaking activities because they've got limited self-confidence in their own English language speaking ability (M-4-30).
>
> Their interpersonal skills have a lot to do with applying the communicative approach with success and with confidence (A-2-19)
>
> When you don't feel confident. When you don't believe in yourself and your own ability then you allow other people to get the edge on you. I think in some ways they've allowed that to happen (J-2-12)

Compounded by the reverential attitude the Vietnamese have towards text, Julie suggested this perceived lack of confidence has bred a reluctance to produce original teaching materials:

> They believe that Cambridge English is more suitable and better and more prestigious than anything that they can produce (J-5-50).

Whilst explanations involving "confidence in one's own ability" etc. may or may not contain elements of truth, they do not serve as adequate explanations for the tacit non-compliance of the Vietnamese with respect to the communicative approach. Instead, they should alert us to the danger of making *attributions* from a Western perspective. For the Vietnamese language teacher, having the confidence to shift the balance of power in the basic teaching paradigm and initiate student-centred learning, will not in itself facilitate communicative language learning. It must be viewed in the wider context of the Vietnamese ethic concerning the hierarchical, harmonious nature of society. Indeed, the "over-assimilation" of Western principles could result in loss of identity leaving a teacher feeling marginalised. Julie remembers one such example:

> I think she [Vietnamese teacher using the communicative approach] just felt embarrassed. In the Vietnamese system the teacher is meant to supply and she had just let them do everything (J-14-15).

The Australian instructors were only too aware that their Vietnamese counterparts would return to a reality which was not wholly supportive of the training they had received from OSB:

> They go back to their reality where they're the only person who is practising or endeavouring to practise, or maybe even being knocked on the head because there's no other support within the school for the whole approach of communicative language teaching principles (A-12-17).

As earlier suggested, the key to this lack of support for communicative language teaching principles is the inappropriateness of the concept of "student-centred learning" in the Vietnamese context. Whilst it is an important principle of the communicative approach and a key feature of "small power-distance" societies, student-centred learning is sharply at odds with the nature of relationships in "large power-distance" societies. It

must also be remembered that in an EFL situation, the teacher, as sole language and cultural resource needs to be more directive than in an ESL situation. As Julie explains:

> Well for me the communicative approach is a lot more teacher-centred in that kind of environment [Vietnam] than it is here [Australia] because the teacher is the only language resource that they have, so it has to be teacher-centred (J-12-19).

For the most part, the Vietnamese counterparts penetrated this inherent contradiction in introducing what is basically an ESL methodology undergirded by Western values into an EFL setting steeped in Confucian values. The resultant behaviour manifested itself in public approval (in the form of "white lies") and private scepticism. Judged from a Western perspective such behaviour might be deemed disingenuous. However, at the "metacultural" level it was simply a clash between structural orders where one order, in this case the Vietnamese order, prevailed.

The basic teacher/student relationship could not survive in Vietnam today if it relied purely upon the Confucian value of unquestioning respect for figures of authority. The traditional roles are created and actively reproduced by the students who, in exchange for their obedience and respect, demand excellence on the part of the teacher. In those cases where teachers lack adequate language skills, the students are showing signs of disobedience. Julie sees this as being a particular problem amongst the older generation of language teachers:

> So very often they [the students] come into the classroom and have more English than the teacher, and then when the teacher gives them a bad model, they are more likely these days to make some noise about it and threaten the teacher (J-3-21).

The informants all reported signs of growing tension in the teacher/student relationship in Vietnam. The picture emerging is one of older teachers clinging even more desperately to the traditional teacher-centred approach to maintain discipline, and

younger teachers caught in a state of limbo, sometimes lacking the necessary training to gain the respect of their students and yet reluctant or afraid to exercise their traditional authority. In a society where status is all important, where teachers were once ranked second only to the King and then hierarchically according to age, this is presenting itself as a major psychological problem. Julie sums up the situation:

> (...) there's been a distinct breakdown in that power relationship I think. Since I think 1975 (...) I would have to attribute it firstly to a loss of educational proficiency among a lot of the teaching staff and with that a loss of confidence (J-1-68).

As Julie suggests, one cause for concern is the lack of classroom management skills required for dealing with the shifting balance of power in the basic teaching paradigm:

> There are two things at work here. One is that classroom management, in our terms, has never been an issue. In a system where students have always been well behaved (...) now that has broken down and if you think that in a traditional system, school system, the teachers never touch those students. They never go anywhere near them. So there you don't have physical contact. (...) you're not allowed to get angry. You're not allowed to lose face in any way, and so through that system, the teacher has become disempowered and has no (...) new classroom management skills. (...) on top of that, I think that a teacher who has knowledge, real knowledge, and knows how to use that knowledge, doesn't have the same problems with status issues inside a classroom as a teacher who basically has very little skill to draw back on (J-2-47).

Among Vietnamese EFL teachers without "real knowledge" of their subject there is a tendency to compensate by imposing tougher disciplinary measures. According to one young Vietnamese teacher, there are an increasing number of reports in the newspapers about attacks on such teachers. I asked her if she had ever felt threatened and she replied that the problem had not affected her personally, mainly because the students appreciated her proficiency in English. Another teacher I regularly observed would often satirise the conformist teacher/student relationship by pretending to punish her students for minor errors. Her classes always had a light-hearted friendly atmosphere.

Experience of Difference

In Australia the notion of "being a friend" is an important part of the role of an ESL teacher in adult learning situations. The significant difference experienced by Michael in Vietnam was the absence of the camaraderie, the "buddies" relationship with colleagues and with one's own adult students. As he puts it:

> (...) trying to be friends with some of the people I have worked with for three years now, and each time I go back it's like I'm a new person again, which I find strange. It's like "out of sight out of mind. Here in Australia if I worked intensively with someone for six weeks they'd be buddies for life. Even if I didn't like them I could still talk to them, I could get to a level very quickly, but I guess in Vietnamese consciousness six weeks is just that [snaps his fingers] (M-18-21).

Michael thought the reason might lie in his unconventional appearance:

> I mean I don't look a hundred percent normal to a conservative in our own society, and people would point that out to me, but in Vietnam it takes till about the last week before I go home that they notice that you've got earrings (M-9-29).

The external or contextual cues, which refer to the communicative content contained in the environment or context in which the interaction is occurring, may under certain conditions be assigned specific cultural meanings. When I asked a Vietnamese if she could shed any light on Michael's experience, she replied that wearing earrings in Vietnam is purely a female custom and, as a "face-saving" measure, they would never focus attention on it.

For Julie, there wasn't any mystery about cultural differences, perhaps only a little mystique symbolised by the women's traditional dress (*ao dai*). Often when I tried to elicit an opinion on cultural differences, a typical response would be: "Well, in my own terms, I mean I always try to think of it first without going into cultural stuff" (J-10-50). By "thinking of it first", she is referring to her tendency to gain understanding of

culturally diverse others from the viewpoint of those other people, "Just thinking about what it's like teaching a foreign language [in Vietnam] and it's a very frightening experience teaching a foreign language" (J-10-48). Thus, in Jul's case, empathy plays an important role in making judgements about causes of behaviour.

Individuals make decisions about what they expect when crossing cultural boundaries, and they also make decisions about their own responses. Alison referred to this as "making a cultural shift". A case in point arose while discussing attitudes to examinations:

Alison: (...) exams are a group activity. (...) They're not individual performance indicators. There's a lot of talking going on during an exam in Vietnam and I found that quite an unusual thing. Also that homework is a collective thing. That the students will naturally get together and do homework together and things like that.

Greg: What about ethics? A few doubts have been raised about ethics when it comes to exams.

Alison: Well I think when our principles come into play we think it's really important that a person be judged through examination on their own performance. So I think that's the biggest cultural shift for us to make (A-8-8).

Clearly, the behaviour of the Vietnamese posed an ethical problem for Alison when judged solely on the basis of her own familiar standards. Her solution of making a "cultural shift" signifies a willingness to accept cultural relativity. Again, it served as a reminder that the experience of working in a foreign setting challenges one's ethnocentric attitudes and demands some type of response.

Mindscapes and the Code

> What the Vietnamese will tell you is that they're great imitators and they're perfectly happy to take something from the Soviet Union or from Germany, something from France and something from you know, the United States. They chuck it all in together and like use a Vietnamese "mindscape" to translate that into something that they think is quite fine (J-5-30).

Metaphors are powerful exemplars of language, which influence the framing of cross-cultural problems. Once a problem is framed within a given perspective, those involved in analysing this problem are locked into a particular way of thinking. To illustrate this point, Michael came up with "the code" as a metaphor for the inscrutable world view of the Vietnamese which made him feel marginalised as a culture learner. Shaking his head he recalled the experience of returning to Australia:

> I came back in 1991 and I wrote a letter to a friend of mine, it was a monster letter, I had to get it all out, and one of the lines in that letter was that I still haven't been able to crack "the code". I can remember that and I still, a few years on, still haven't been able to crack "the code". I can't really get inside, and I think it is because, as I say, that world view is so limited, I mean you come as an extra terrestrial (M-9-21).

Just as the Vietnamese psyche had represented a formidable "code" for Michael "to crack", he imagined that he presented a similar problem for the Vietnamese.

> They just see you as a total difference. The whole thing is different, the whole package and then after a long time of looking at the whole package they start noticing the bits. I don't know. You see that's another thing. I just can't get inside the cognitive processing (M-9-25).

Thus "the code" became a very powerful metaphor to describe the frustrations in dealing with cultural variations in cognitive processing. What is more, I in turn allowed this metaphor to shape my thinking because it fitted with the literature written on Vietnam which had influenced my youth. For example, "The Quiet American", contained similar metaphors to express the inscrutability of Miss Phuong. I asked one Vietnamese teacher

if she thought Greene's portrayal of his heroine as inscrutable is true of many Vietnamese?" "Outside, all you see of us is just like an iceberg. We only let you see the tip" she replied. Months later, after my field study in Ho Chi Minh City, I reflected on this comment, and was reminded of the subtle Vietnamese art of irony, which is applied so masterfully in dealing with foreigners.

Michael's creative use of language struck a chord with me and therefore I became somehow locked into thinking that we could never really understand the Vietnamese. Later I reflected on our dialogue and it occurred to me how language makes reality appear and disappear and how we build categories or themes to organise our thinking on a particular topic. Our perception of other cultures is usually based not on their complex reality, but on the simplified image they project. The more lucid and sharply defined that image is, the more convinced we will be that we are intimately acquainted with it. Greene had already evoked the "iceberg" metaphor in my mind, so I was basically looking for confirmation of that image from my informants. I started to notice that the "iceberg" metaphor locked me into a particular line of questioning. I realised I was guilty of wanting the Vietnamese to conform to this image of mystery, and Michael supplied me with all the confirmatory messages I needed to make the "iceberg" metaphor fit the reality. The following discussion highlights this point:

Greg: So there is definitely a code and it's very hard to crack?

Michael: I think so.

Greg: Do you think that is the secret, cracking this code, to importing the communicative approach? Are the two issues related?

Michael: I think they are, because unless you can get inside then what's happening is on the surface level (M-10-21).

Personal experiences, the use of metaphors and interpretive frameworks serve to both illuminate and limit our understanding of other cultures. Use of the word "code"

signifies inscrutability, but like any system of signs, it can be learnt. Reading the Vietnamese involves learning to read the contextual cues. The Vietnamese are not inscrutable to one another, therefore there must exist a way for them to be understood by outsiders. It is just that the stereotype of the "inscrutable Asian" is so ingrained in our thinking, that we can be lulled into believing that they defy understanding.

Cracking the Code

> "Every organisation, every place you go is just fraught with internal battles and conflicts and it's all done on individual personality lines" (Vietnamese teacher).

One powerful metaphor that Michael created was "the rock" which in a word summed up his frustrations with what appeared to be the impenetrable group logic of the Vietnamese, "If you look at Vietnam as a rock and I'm able to get around the edges of it" (M-17-20). He had noticed the strong tendency among the Vietnamese to look after group interests, especially within the family, and how this seemed at odds with the "large power-distance" in public interpersonal relations. He saw the way the workshop participants would verbally attack their colleagues in order to enhance their own face:

> In class, in the workshops themselves when someone says an idea that someone else disagrees with or is contrary to what we have said as the expert trainers, someone else, to put that person down and to raise themselves in our esteem and in their eyes, I think will really go to town on that person (M-9-14).

Commenting on a decision by the educational authorities to send English language training experts to one of his workshops, he touched on two other important features of Vietnamese society. Firstly, the tendency for figures of authority to give preferential treatment to members of their own subgroups, and secondly, the importance placed on meritocracy, "I was preaching to the converted, but again, they got a certificate at the end of it" (M-7-2)

Each point above contradicts the view expressed in the literature of a largely harmonious society underpinned by a strong belief in the value of the family and the principles of Buddhism. However, they are only contradictions when viewed from an individualist standpoint, but cease to be so when seen as the norms of collectivist societies. Ironically, Michael penetrated the logic of collectivism, but it left him feeling marginalised.

> I don't find it [the competitive behaviour] contradictory to the family values. (...) The family as a unit still is very strong and there is a lot of co-operation within that unit, but outside that it's not necessary. What was that phrase. "The laws of the King stop at the village gate" (M-9-14)

The other two informants were also aware of the apparent contradiction and each had been affected by it. However, unlike Michael, they saw the competitiveness as a sign of individualism:

> I'd say it would go along the collectivist side of the continuum as a whole, the structure of their society, and yet the degree of competition generated in education in Vietnam, and considered to be extremely healthy and very positive, is quite vicious. So, and that to me smacks of individualism (A-7-47).

> I find them much more individualistic [*sic*] oriented than team group oriented (J-15-27).

Attaching the label of individualism to Vietnamese behaviour led to the disconfirmed expectancy that students would be competitive under examination conditions. Instead, they, along with their teachers, approached the test as a group effort. As Julie recalls:

> When I arrived in the classrooms, in each and every classroom, the teachers were allowing the students to, in our terms, cheat in the most inglorious manner. In one classroom the teacher pretended to be asleep, had his head down so that the students could quite happily just go about their business and they were swapping papers and looking over and copying. In the next classroom the teacher was wandering around giving answers to the students, that is the trainer was giving answers to the teachers and another one of the students who was meant to be one of the better ones in the class was actually wandering around giving answers as well. In the third classroom, ah there was absolute silence and everything was

> under absolutely control. The fourth classroom, I just came and stood at the door and the trainer saw me and clapped her hands nervously and everybody, when I finally turned the corner [laughs] they were working studiously. So, these people have told me that they believe in objective testing, but they yes, if they had brought the test papers back they would say nobody cheated, and when we finally talked about it I was pretty angry and we let it go for a day. The following day the Vietnamese teachers approached me with a litany of excuses. One person said, "It's the end of the course. We want our participants to be happy". Someone else said, "These are our former students. We must make them feel successful". Someone else said, "Only a few in my class cheated" and one person said "I can't accept responsibility. It isn't fair" and some else said "Oh I see, I see what you mean. I see what you mean. We should accept responsibility. We won't do it again" (J-15-42).

All the above behaviours described by Julie are consistent with the characteristics of collectivist societies. In each instance, the needs of the group were placed above Western notions of personal responsibility and professional standards. In fact, personal responsibility was rejected as being unfair, except in the case of the teacher who tried to save face for Julie and pay lip service to reforming the practice. I asked one Vietnamese teacher if she was aware of this phenomenon and she replied "if we tell you one thing and do another, its because we don't want to hurt your feelings. It's what you people call white lies".

The incongruity between the Vietnamese word and deed made Julie angry but it also offered an insight into a very different reality to her own. She was dealing with people who have another way of viewing the world, one in which the interests of the group far outweigh promises made to non-members. However, Julie's appraisal of the situation stopped short of any cultural interpretation at the macro level. Instead, she attributed the incident to a "face-saving" strategy on the part of the Vietnamese teachers. In her own words, "It's got to do with your own sense of your own self worth and self esteem. Teachers don't fail anybody" (J-16-48).

My Vietnamese colleagues assured me that teachers do in fact use objective testing to either pass or fail students, but the importance placed on the test must be weighed

against the needs of the group. Reconsidered in terms of a clash between collectivist and individualist logics, the need of the group members to maintain harmony was stronger than the desire to compete on an individual basis and, although in collectivist societies education is seen as the best way of gaining prestige and joining a higher status group, Julie's test did not offer the students any worthwhile certification or individual advantage and therefore might not have been taken seriously.

The cultural variance in how the Vietnamese encoded their messages and how the Australian informants decoded those same messages, became one of the foremost problems encountered in working together to implement the communicative approach. In its passage through the cultural level, the hidden logic of collectivism had presented itself as individualism.

Casual Cultural Explanations

All three Australian informants tried to resist the use of oversimplified stereotypes in their description of what, for many Western teachers, would be unacceptable behaviour. Their attitudes reflected a deeper understanding of the meaning of cultural relativity, which in Michael's case, reflected itself in the willingness to admit to himself that he did not understand certain cultural differences and to withhold judgement about them. Learning another culture is one avenue toward examining one's own life and knowing one's self. A significant part of the learning involves discarding the labels we have used to categorise and explain behaviour in our own culture. Michael recognised this attitudinal change in himself. As he put it:

> I would have kept going bang bang bang into "the rock" unless I had changed myself. So, in a sense, it's made me a lot more tolerant (M-13-33)

Culture learning is one thing, but to free oneself entirely from cultural pre-programming is another. *Attributions* are typically revealed in the elaborated codes that the three Australian informants use, for example, the particular language that Alison used to frame her thinking on the problems associated with adopting the communicative approach:

> Language teaching principles are all about processes. That's another new introduction for a lot of Vietnamese secondary school teachers. That's a whole new learning experience, that process is important (A-7-19).

The implicit message here being that the Vietnamese would need to assimilate to a particular Western educational philosophy emphasising process rather than product. The concept of "learning as a process" takes on a certain universal quality and, for Alison, identifying with such universals is an important part of bridging the cultural gap. However, this in no way implies that the Vietnamese should reject their own culture. A point which she is careful to make:

> I'm not saying they lose their culture, but they have a flexibility within their own competence and their own capacity, their own confidence inside themselves to actually reach out and identify with something else that's out there (A-6-42).

Weeks after my dialogue with Alison I was still reflecting on her use of the metaphor "out there". To my mind, it encoded a particular view of knowledge which assumes that social reality, like physical objects, has an existence independent of the observer. Within this scientific paradigm, knowledge is hierarchical and therefore generated downward in the form of a linear chain. In this respect, knowledge flowing from the top is used to either legitimise or build practical models such as "the communicative approach". My main concern with this perspective is that it lends itself to a subtle form of cultural imperialism. The principles and practices of communicative learning are not "out there", instead they are socially constructed within the matrix of Western values.

Conceiving of communicative language teaching as a cognitive universal provides a highly individualistic view that frames and shapes the way intercultural communication is

and is not to be understood. Because they exhibit certain characteristics associated with individualism, such as competitiveness and meritocracy, the Vietnamese language teachers are cast into the role of individualist, or as Julie puts it:

> Now maybe that's just because I'm working with a lot of prima donna ESL teachers. I mean some people will tell you that ESL teachers all over the world are total prima donna individualists and maybe they are in Vietnam as well (J-19-53).

Assigning the Vietnamese EFL teachers the role of "prima donna" is an example of the role of cultural knowledge in the construction of meaning. The label "prima donna" is embedded with meanings derived from the social theory of individualism, which is a Western "meaning perspective" advocating the free and independent action of the individual. Employing the same "meaning perspective", Julie describes the ability to adopt the communicative approach as a matter of will-power. She said "I am sure that if they decide that they want to take it on [then they can] (J-4-16).

Our culture is a major factor in perceptual discrepancies. Culture helps supply us with our world-view and therefore plays a dominant role in intercultural communication. Every cross-cultural interaction rests on assumptions each party makes about their own and the other party's culture. The problem with such assumptions is that they are often inaccurate and misleading, for example, the assumption that Western culture has discovered a language teaching methodology with universal application and that communicative competence shares the same priority in every society. In the confusion between what might be called collectivistic and individualistic logics, it is quite natural to fall into the trap of assigning one's own hierarchy of goals and value orientations to the Vietnamese. The following comment is an example of how typical values of individualist societies, such as "acquiring competence" and "realising one's own potential", tend to frame our perceptions of people from other cultures:

> So perhaps the cream of the crop that we see coming out of Vietnam right now. Those who have degrees of confidence in their own competence in English and a desire to identify with English speakers and a curiosity about the whole society of those English speakers, be they Americans or Australians or English or Canadians or whatever, that there is a wanting within that person to identify with them. I think that is a really crucial point about language learners and language competence. That you actively want to communicate with those people. I think some people have that to a much greater degree than others (A-6-28).

On the continuum between collectivism and individualism, there will be fringe elements in the Vietnamese society who share our Western goals, however, for the most part their goals will not correspond to those of the West. In other words, rather than having the need to acquire competence and strive for personal development, the Vietnamese will be more likely to have the need to acquire status and look after the welfare of the family. It is disarmingly easy to take things for granted in Vietnam. As a newcomer it is easy to seize on an isolated event or aspect of behaviour, with little significance or long term implications. It might simply be orchestrated to make the foreigner feel good or develop a particular frame of mind. This is one of the most difficult and sometimes hurtful lessons for foreigners to learn.

The often unexamined practice of making casual cultural explanations is part of a much larger picture in which social interactions in one culture are distorted through the prism of values in another culture. Whenever there is a cultural difference, there is a strong tendency for people to interpret it in terms of their own personal philosophy. The pivotal notion of a Western teacher/student relationship as being an ideal relationship makes its entry here. Its presence should alert us to the social principles undergirding the communicative approach. Indeed, so long as the embedded notions of social relations remain unstated, then the essential conflict arising in the transfer of a Western learning procedure into Vietnamese culture can all too easily be ignored. The alternative is to concede that there is some other way of viewing the world which is incompatible with the principles of the communicative approach. Michael's account of banging his

head on "the rock" is recognition of this factor and a graphic parallel to Bochner's notion of a "marginal" response to "second culture" influences.

The Mediating Person

Successful intercultural communication involves the ability to synthesise different ways of viewing the world, and while no amount of skill in "mediating" (to use Bochner's term) is going to reconcile the fundamental differences in social relations between Vietnam and the West, it can make a contribution where there is mutual distrust. One of the obvious benefits is honest communication, as Michael noted:

> Once they got a little bit of trust in me, they had no trouble coming across with what they thought would have been in the past major criticisms of what we were doing. The major criticisms being related to the relevance and the level that we were approaching. (M-16-41).

All three informants stressed that they strived to bring out positive shared features between their own and the Vietnamese culture. Julie spoke of this search for universals or *etics* in the following exchange:

Julie: (...) the thing which is interesting me at the moment in this process of taking on Western conceptual frameworks and ideas is "when is somebody going to start looking at it from a Vietnamese perspective and debating it and saying (...) "is it possible within our own traditions and our own conceptual frameworks about knowledge and the way people learn? Is there anything in there that we can pull out and say that there's a match? Did Confucius, for example, say anything that feeds in?"

Greg: With the Western paradigm?

Julie: With the Western paradigm.

Greg: Have you come across anything? Can you find a match?

Julie: (...) Confucius has this great saying. (...) "If you give a man a fish, you can feed him for one day. If you teach a man to fish, you can feed him for a lifetime". (...) this comes up in the workshop. I use this as a kind of

> framework and I put Confucius' name and the date. It attracts a lot of attention [pause] in the sense that people, in their journals, they write this down and they say "this makes terribly good sense" (J-4-30).

Julie's comments, quoted above, represented a qualitatively new combination of the Vietnamese and her own culture. Her synthesis of Confucianism and self-directed learning is an example of Bochner's category of "mediating" in the sense that it is the constructive ability of integrating disparate world views.

By and large the three Australian informants recognised the positive aspects of Vietnamese language teaching and looked for possible points for integration. For example, Alison is careful to point out that the grammar translation method should not be seen as inferior to the communicative approach because after all it has been able to produce some very competent language teachers:

> Look at all of them. I mean they've gone through the system that they are now perpetrating and they're actually (...) are able to communicate. So there's something to be said for their system too. (A-1-54)

Again Julie's answer was to integrate certain principles of the communicative approach into existing features of the grammar translation method. Skills such as reading comprehension should be retained, however, with an emphasis on meaning rather than form:

> My interest really is to make it as integrated as possible. (...) If you want to focus on reading as part of your examination system which I think is a great idea. (...) my feeling about the teacher training stuff in Vietnam is that the focus should be on the message. That communication is about giving and receiving of messages for particular reasons (J-12-23).

Whilst it would be wrong to suggest that the informants are without cultural biases about the soundness of their educational practices, it is certainly true that "mediating" is an important aspect of their work, without which their professional knowledge could not be

easily applied. When teaching cross-culturally, it is not enough to operate purely in a theoretical mode, clinging to a single concept of good teaching, in this case the communicative approach. Once this is understood, and once it is explained to the Vietnamese teachers that introducing the approach will actually mean making changes, not only in their teaching techniques, but also in their values, then points of integration between Western and Vietnamese teaching practices can be jointly explored.

This chapter has examined the range of viewpoints expressed by the informants on the appropriateness of the communicative approach in Vietnam. Beside the physical constraints of large class sizes and lack of resources, there was considerable consensus among the informants that acceptance of the communicative approach in Vietnam is also undermined by inadequate language skills on the part of many teachers, the demands of examinations, lack of support from authorities and the wider school community, and finally the pressure on individual teachers not to be different.

As we have seen, the informants, in addition to teaching this particular methodology, also needed to act as links between different cultural systems. Their task was to build a picture of the communicative approach which was culturally acceptable to the Vietnamese.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS

Discussion of the Findings

This study records and examines the views of three individual instructors on the appropriateness of the communicative approach to English language teaching in Vietnamese high schools. As anticipated, intercultural communication played an important role in the lives of the OSB trainers and I could view their experiences in the workshops as the strategies for enacting their cultural values on the basis of their knowledge and beliefs. The instances of what I perceived to be misinterpretation of Vietnamese culture were expressed in the disappointment of the informants in the Vietnamese for failing to share the same values. The Vietnamese insistence on grammar in the workshops, the blatant disregard of objective testing and the perceived reluctance to develop friendships are all examples of behaviour which, for the Australian instructors, were culturally unacceptable. The first step was to cast a wide net and examine the Vietnamese from a variety of perspectives. Based on the relevant literature and informal discussions with Vietnamese teachers, I was able to construct a working map of Vietnamese society. Although limited, the overall picture was a powerful tool in guiding questions and organising the informants' responses under themes.

The modest conclusion which can be drawn from the informants' responses is that the communicative approach in its original form is unsuitable for Vietnamese conditions. Although there is a strong demand for communicative competence in Vietnam, it is not matched by adequate teacher training, communicative language materials and suitable learning environments. Furthermore, the communicative approach was designed for an environment where the teacher acts as facilitator, a factor which would require a radical change in the traditional teacher/student relationship in Vietnam. Details of these barriers are outlined below.

On the problem of entrenched traditions, the general view was that the reading material in the prescribed texts was more often only a vehicle for reinforcing grammatical structures rather than initiating meaningful communicative classroom activities. This problem was compounded by two additional factors. Firstly, the cultural reluctance on the part of the Vietnamese to challenge the written word and secondly, the focus on grammar-translation in the examination system leaving little time for developing conversation skills. Beside the importance placed on examinations, of further concern was the barrier to communicative language teaching imposed by the nature of the social relationships. The Vietnamese English language teachers are under constant pressure to conform to the expectations of school principals, parents, peers and students alike.

Ultimately, there is a basic conflict between Western and Vietnamese pedagogical practices. While the former is "process oriented", with the stress on communicative competence, the latter is "product oriented", with the emphasis on memorisation. In Vietnam, the English examination is designed to measure translation skills, and tends to favour those students who have managed to memorise the prescribed texts. What it does not measure, however, is the meaningful use of language in social situations. Until Ministerial and community attitudes change towards the form and content of assessment, then there will be no alternative on the part of the teachers but to devote the majority of classroom time to grammar and translation.

The informants were careful to point out that the conformist nature of the teacher/student relationship in Vietnam is changing in relation to the younger generation of teachers. There are signs of a willingness among the younger teachers to experiment with teaching styles and communicative strategies. However, this is more likely a result of increased confidence due to higher levels of language ability. In those cases where teachers had relatively high language proficiency, the incidence of communicative language teaching increased. By contrast, teachers with poor language skills tended to favour the grammar-translation method.

The informants' ways of making the communicative approach culturally acceptable to the Vietnamese are in keeping with their own cultural values embedded and reflected in the language that they use. Each view highlighted the role of cultural knowledge, interpretive frameworks, personal experiences and metaphors in the construction of meaning. Where the experience of difference was most pronounced, there was a greater tendency on the part of the informants to make incorrect attributions regarding Vietnamese cultural practices. Seen as a whole, the collectivist nature of Vietnamese society was problematic for the informants, as is evidenced by Michael's use of metaphors, such as "the code" and "the rock". The solution for Alison and Julie was to view the Vietnamese teachers as individuals, with similar needs and goals to their own, a point which is exemplified by Julie's use of the term "prima donna". However, the example she gave of the communal cheating during the English language test showed that the interests of the group can override desires for personal recognition, a hallmark of collectivist societies.

How do the findings of this field study compare with the literature discussed in Chapter 2? Overall, the picture of the educational landscape pieced together in the literature review matches the impressions of the informants. In particular, the conformist teacher/student relationship, teacher centred lessons, the sanctity of text, the role of memorisation and recitation in language learning and finally the focus on individual words and structures rather than attention to overall meaning. Of course, societies are not static, and the informants all noticed signs of change among the younger generation of teachers in their willingness to incorporate elements of the communicative approach and redefine relationships with their students along interactive and non-authoritarian lines.

The literature on intercultural communication was instrumental in explaining the contradictions arising from the informants' perceptions of Vietnamese cultural practices. In particular, the distortions emanating from attributions and *contexting* based on

Western notions of personal responsibility and interpersonal relations which lie at the heart of communicative language teaching.

In terms of Bochner's model of cross-cultural interaction (see Table 3) discussed in the literature, all three informants tried in their own way to view the Vietnamese from an "insider" perspective, something Alison referred to as "making a cultural shift". There was only one report of "identity confusion", indicating a "marginal" response to contact with the Vietnamese. More often the reports reflected forms of mediation. Several statements indicated an appreciation for the relative effectiveness of traditional Vietnamese teaching methods, and there was also a great deal of empathy towards individual teachers, in view of their difficult working conditions and psychological pressures. Rather than attempt to assimilate the Vietnamese to the communicative approach, generally the informants looked for features capable of being integrated. At the level of beliefs and values, the clearest example of the category of "mediating" was Julie's strategy of finding philosophical points of contact between Eastern and Western cultures.

The literature also raises the difficult question of cultural imperialism. While there were no clear examples of attempts at assimilation on the part of the informants, there was an expectation for the Vietnamese counterparts to behave according to Western ethical and professional standards. Failure on the part of the Vietnamese to meet these expectations sometimes elicited responses of disappointment from the informants.

Teaching a new methodology to a group of foreign adults is a complicated undertaking and a considerable challenge. Although the OSB workshops were regarded as successful by the Australian instructors, there were currents of passive resistance from the Vietnamese which have not been addressed. The communicative approach was designed for educating students to live in a modern Western society. It is underpinned by a particular view of social relations which differs from that of the Vietnamese, and

although there was general consensus among the informants that it needs to be culturally sensitive to the Vietnamese context, Vietnamese language teachers need to be made aware of the content of this cultural shaping.

Theoretical and Educational Implications

With the growing interest in knowledge and technology transfer to Vietnam, there is a growing need for an understanding of the interactive nature of culture and language. The findings regarding the informants' views of their Vietnamese counterparts highlight the important role of intercultural communication in the teaching process. As Lawler points out, "It is quite possible that ... the best way to improve practice is not by producing facts, but by producing frames, or ways of organising and thinking about the world" (in Orton, 1990). It is hoped, therefore, that other trainers will find it beneficial to have acknowledged the cross-cultural issues which confront them as they embark on the task of introducing the communicative approach into Vietnamese practice.

The contribution of this study to educational theory lies in its provision of a "thick description" for future trainers contemplating transferring the communicative approach to Vietnamese classrooms. It is an account which finds parallels with Hofstede's description of collectivist societies and Bochner's model of cross-cultural interaction. Through the findings in the interviews, it provides a working map of EFL in Vietnam and raises points of conflict between the cultural values of the informants and their Vietnamese counterparts.

In conclusion, for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Vietnamese conditions, it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted. As the literature suggests and examples from the informants indicate, "mediating" can serve as a useful tool in this endeavour. Thus, the eventual form of the pedagogical practice would

appear to involve the teacher's ability to either filter the method to make it culturally appropriate, or to redefine the teacher/student relationship in keeping with the cultural forms embedded in the communicative approach. However, while "mediating" has the potential to overcome the cultural barriers it alone will not ensure the success of the communicative approach. For communicative language teaching to become a reality, teachers will require a higher degree of communicative competence, preferably through training in English speaking countries or contact with native speakers. Class sizes will need to be reduced to allow teachers sufficient contact time with students, and the design and content of texts and examinations will need to be consonant with communicative goals. Thus, any endorsement of the communicative approach for Vietnam must take into account the internal contradiction in introducing a teaching method which, in many respects, may be doing teachers and students a disservice.

Suggestions for Further Research

The findings of this study describe a range of perspectives on the cultural aspects of introducing Vietnamese EFL teachers to contemporary language teaching methods as uncovered in a series of interviews with three instructors recently returned from Vietnam. The study offers a first effort at a causal analysis of the perceptions reported. It is not intended to be generalised to other ESL teachers in other foreign settings. Its usefulness may be in the extent to which it promotes discussion and further research into the intercultural aspects of knowledge transfer.

The following suggestions for research projects compliment and build on the findings of the present study:

1. Extending Hofstede's survey to provide empirical evidence to support or refute the collectivist view of Vietnamese society contained in this study.

2. Observations of OSB workshops to document aspects of intercultural communication and compare teachers' reports with observed interactions.

3. An investigation into the relationship between discipline problems and teaching methods in Vietnam.

4. An examination of the prescribed texts in Vietnam to determine the assumptions made about how the students should perceive Western society.

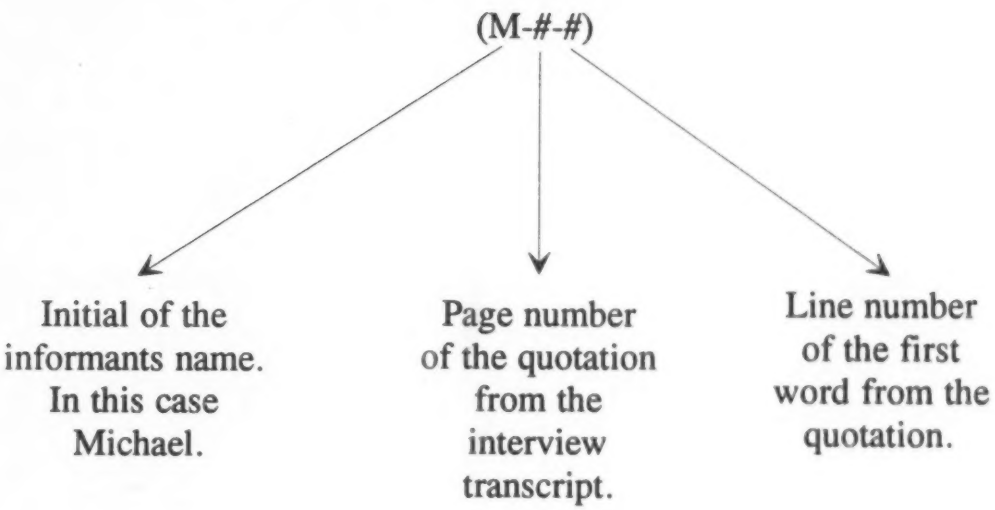
5. An evaluation of the effectiveness of pre-departure programs in preparing trainers for possible points of conflict in their cultural roles.

With the projected increase in the number of Western practitioners working in Vietnam, this study urges the importance of understanding the cultural messages embedded in language. I leave the final word in this study to Alison, "Actual language learning is about learning about culture. Learning how to behave appropriately in different social situations" (A-3-3).

APPENDIX A CODING SYSTEM

When quoting from the interviews in the case study, I followed a convention of embedding a numbering system within the text as an audit trail.

HOW TO READ THE CODES


(M-#-#)
Initial of the informants name. In this case Michael.
Page number of the quotation from the interview transcript.
Line number of the first word from the quotation.

APPENDIX B CASE STUDY CONSENT FORM

Researcher: Greg Ellis
Hawthorn Institute of Education
442 Auburn Rd
Hawthorn, Victoria
Australia, 3122
Home: 428 0635 Work: 810 3215

The purposes of this project are:

1. to satisfy the requirements for a minor thesis in a Masters of Education degree at La Trobe University, Melbourne.
2. to learn about OSB's provision of training in Vietnam.
3. to gain insight into the experiences of three Australian teachers involved in the program.

I, _____, understand that:

1. The information obtained during this project will be used to write a case study which may be read by the respondents and two examiners from La Trobe University who may wish to conduct an audit check of the data.

2. Real names will not be used during data collection or in the case studies.

3. I am entitled to review the case study before the final draft is written and negotiate changes with the researcher.

4. I will receive a copy of the final case study within one week after its completion.

5. I may withdraw from this study at any time by speaking to the researcher and all data collected from me will be returned immediately.

I agree to participate in this case study project according to the preceding terms.

Respondent:_____
Date:_____

I (do/do not) grant permission to be quoted directly in the case study report.

Respondent:_____
Date:_____

I agree to conduct and report this case study according to the preceding terms.

Researcher:_____
Date:_____

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